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ABSTRACT

Educational credentials are used as a yardstick with which to measure the knowledge, skills, and abilities of adults, regardless of actual workplace abilities. With this pressure to earn a credential, adults are returning to higher education in vast numbers. Unlike students in traditional age ranges, adult students have multiple roles they must fulfill. The obligations of the roles of parent, spouse, child, and worker must be met in addition to those of student. The potential for conflict in any of the roles of the adult student is real, and the conflict must be resolved in a timely manner so that the student can put time, energy, and effort into his or her multiple roles. This paper proposes methods of conflict resolution drawn from the literature that can assist the adult student in the resolution process. (Contains 25 references.) (Author/SLD)

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CONFLICT RESOLUTION STRATEGIES FOR THE ADULT HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENT

Conflict Resolution Strategies For The Adult Higher Education Student

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Abstract

Adults are expected to demonstrate, through formal education and training that they have attained the knowledge, skills and abilities necessary to grow in their jobs. Educational credentials are used as a yardstick upon which to measure these knowledge, skills and abilities, regardless of actual workplace abilities. With this pressure to earn a credential, adults are returning to higher education in vast numbers. Unlike traditional-aged students, adult students have multiple roles that they must fulfill. The obligations of the roles of parent, spouse, child and worker must be met in addition to those of student. The potential for conflict in any of the roles of the adult student is real and the conflict must be resolved in a timely manner so that the student can put his time, energy and effort into the multiple roles he must engage. This paper proposes methods of conflict resolution which, when implemented by the adult student, can assist in the resolution conflict.

Conflict Resolution Strategies for the Adult Higher Education Student

Introduction

Adults return to school for a variety of reasons, which run the spectrum of personal growth and satisfaction, (Scala, 1996) to the desire to become better educated (Iovacchino, 1985). According to Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory, there is a rising order of needs to which all humans respond. Maslow's theory (1970) states that the hierarchy of needs ascends from the basic needs of shelter, food and water, to the second level of safety, the third level of belonging, the fourth level of self-esteem through to the highest level, that of self-actualization. Once the first four levels are satisfied, one can pursue the need of self-actualization. Kiel (1999) noted many definitions of self-actualization, defined as, "a desire to become more and more what one is" (Maslow, 92), "being a mature, full human person in whom the human potentialities have been realized and actualized" (Mittleman, 116)" and, "as one who is eager to undergo new experiences, and learn new ideas and skills" (Heylighen, 42-3).

Maslow's theory explains the innate need that can motivate an adult to return to the classroom. Once the first four levels of need have been satisfied, the need for self-actualization will motivate adults to seek development and personal growth. Since self-actualization is considered a process that does not end, an adult will continuously seek ways to fulfill the need of self-actualization. Adults pursuing self-actualization may, at some point along the process, seek to fulfill this need in the classroom.

Frederick Herzberg (1971) theorized that, "man (has a) compelling urge to realize his own potentiality by continuous psychological growth" (56) "...the six points of psychological growth as stated by Herzberg are:

1. Knowing more.
2. Seeing more relationships in what we know.
3. Being creative.
4. Being effective in ambiguous situations.
5. Maintaining individuality in the face of pressures of the group.
6. Attaining real psychological growth.

Realizing potentiality by furthering one's education assists in fulfillment of the 6 points of psychological growth. By returning to school, the adult student will gain knowledge, and the more he learns, the greater his ability to see the relationships in what he knows. His ability to create and be creative grows as his knowledge grows. The adult student can learn the skills necessary to be effective in ambiguous situations, whatever his course of study. Conflict may be caused by attempting to maintain individuality in the face of group pressure. By returning to college, the adult student may be setting himself apart from colleagues and family. Pressure may be exerted from a group to return the adult student to conformity with the group. Psychological growth then occurs when the student can resist the group's pressure to conform and maintain his individuality.

Enrolling in college coursework to fulfill needs means adding the role of student to the adult's already full and busy life. Unlike his traditional-aged academic counterpart, the adult student must learn how to manage several simultaneous roles, in addition to the financial concerns of college tuition and fees and the demands of college coursework and study (Johnson, Schwartz & Bower, 2000). "Many... (students) have difficulty anticipating the impact these combined role(s) demand... family and student work 'just never ends" (Horne, 1998, 93). Adult students often experience conflict when attempting to combine education and family. Both of these institutions demand exclusive loyalty, unlimited time commitments and high flexibility (Horne, 1997, 336).

Add the workplace to the volatile mixture of family and school, and conflict in the adult student's life can be expected.

Goode (1960) detailed 3 dimensions of role strain when one takes on more than one role. These dimensions are: role conflict, where there is simultaneous, incompatible demands; role overload, where there is insufficient time to meet demand: and, role contagion, which is the preoccupation with one role while performing demands. This paper will focus on the dimension of role conflict and present conflict resolution strategies to bring compatibility to the various roles which the adult student fulfills. This paper will also examine time management and the function it plays in successful conflict management

Relevance and Significance of Paper

"Adults are increasingly expected, and often required, to engage in serious study if they are to maintain or improve their employment positions..." (Blaxter & Tight, 1994). Adult workers are expected to show, through formal education and training, that they have attained the skills necessary to grow in their jobs. Educational credentials are used as a yardstick upon which to measure knowledge, skills and abilities, regardless of actual workplace ability.

The College Board defines an adult student as over 25 years old, with a full-time job. The National Center for Education Statistics stated that in 1999 48% of those in the population 18 years old and above participated in learning activities in 1999 and 3,414,000 adults aged 25-34 were enrolled in postsecondary education. With so many adults pursuing degrees or continuing their education to improve employment situations,

there is an opportunity for conflict in the home and workplace. With the responsibilities that the adult student has, he must act proactively to ensure success in meeting the ultimate goal, success in college coursework, while maintaining supportive relationships.

Knowles (1980) theorized that adults learn differently than children and therefore need different methods to help them obtain success in educational pursuits. He defined andragogy as "the art and science of helping adults learn." The five assumptions which underlie andragogy describe the adult learner as someone who:

1. Has an independent self-concept and who can direct his own learning.
2. Has accumulated a reservoir of life experiences that is a rich resource for learning.
3. Has learning needs closely associated to changing social roles.
4. Is problem-centered and interested in immediate application of knowledge.
5. Is motivated to learn by internal, rather than external forces.

Because adult students learn differently than children, Knowles (1980) proposed program planning for adult students, which included models for design, implementation and evaluation of educational experiences of adults. Educational institutions which serve adult students must be sensitive to the differences in adult verses child learning patterns and ensure that the curriculum, classroom set-up and teaching methods carefully follow the framework set by Knowles. Failure of educational institutions to so do could create conflict in the adult student by treating them as children when they are in the classroom, but expecting adult-level results.

"In our society, conflict is usually considered to be bad... . However, experts agree that conflict...has some desirable effects" (Tubbs, 277). Furthermore, Ramundo (1992) states, "Conflict is desirable because it provides a medium through which problems are aired and solutions obtained; can cause personal change; resolve

tension..." The adult student will fulfill the requirements of his multiple roles more effectively if solutions to conflict are agreed to and tension is resolved.

"Conflict may originate from a number of different sources, including:

1. Differences in ...beliefs... or desires;
2. A scarcity of some resource, such as ...money... or time, and;
3. Rivalries."

To these could be added the difficulty of the task, the pressure to avoid failure..." (Tubbs, 278).

Differences in beliefs or desires could create conflict between the adult student and those at home or work because one's beliefs and desires must change for college success. The adult must change some of his priorities once he returns to the classroom. His beliefs as to what must take precedence in his personal and work life may change drastically. For example, he may have lunched regularly with his co-workers before returning to school, but once he returns to school, he foregoes the group to complete library research on his lunch hour. Conflict may arise at home because the adult student's desire to do well academically may preclude spending as much time with his family as he did prior to enrolling in college.

Scarcity of money or time can also cause conflict in various ways for the adult student. Large blocks of time must be set-aside for the educational pursuits of attendance, study and research, which means that there is less time to spend with family or at work. Since money must be expended for tuition, books and fees, conflict may arise because there may not be the disposable income available to family members once schooling has begun.

Rivalries may also cause conflict for the adult student. At work, one who returns to school to learn new skills or further his education may incite a rivalry with a co-worker who lacks the motivation or opportunity to do like-wise. Rivalry could also occur at home where the partner sees the adult student as ahead in a competition that does not exist.

Pressure to avoid failure is a conflict that the adult student may feel and then inflict on those around him; he may exert pressure on himself to succeed at whatever the cost. In addition, integration of the student role may be more difficult than he expected, so he may feel more pressure than he expected.

The adult student, while trying to fulfill their concurrent roles, often report, "constant overload, frequent role conflicts and inadequate support" (Edwards, 2). An adult student must use conflict resolution strategies to effectively allocate the limited availability of valuable resources and garner the support necessary to be successful in college.

Conflict should be resolved in a timely manner and not be allowed to simmer. "Conflict is hard to keep under control once it has begun. There is a definite trend toward escalation and polarization" (Tubbs, 280). For example, escalation of a conflict may occur when the adult student quits his job when co-workers harass him concerning his flexible schedule on the nights that he attends school. What may have begun as teasing the adult student about his special privileges, could become hostile when it continues for the lengthy term of his enrollment. Polarization, which is the division that is caused by conflict, also occurs when conflict is not resolved in its' early stages. Unresolved conflict serves only to drive a wedge into relationships upon which the adult

student must rely. By quickly resolving conflict as it arises, adult students will not antagonize those on whom they depend upon for support. Unresolved conflict will only serve to add additional stressors to those already being experienced by the adult student. Resolving conflict allows the adult student to concentrate on effectively juggling roles for success in college, and ultimately, the realization of his goal.

The Adult Student Experience

While attempting to fill multiple roles, the adult student can easily become overwhelmed because of the simultaneous demands placed on him. He may feel that the easiest, and perhaps only, feasible role to discontinue is that of student. Jocobi (1987) found that non-traditional students have significantly more time constraints and role conflict than the traditional student. Adult students experience the simultaneous, incompatible demands of role conflict. These roles can include those of employee, spouse, parent and child. The adult student has responsibilities which limit the amount of time which can be dedicated to college attendance and work. Children must be cared for, a marriage must be nourished, parental relationships must be maintained and work, where one must earn his place, must stay a high priority.

"Research shows that the main reasons that mature students drop out of school are; lack of money, lack of time, family responsibilities, stress caused by work loads and failure to adjust to the school setting as a whole" (Gammon, 1997). This paper will concentrate on conflict resolution strategies to use at work and home when there is a high need to maintain relationships and to come to consensus as to how to successfully resolve conflict.

Conflict at Home

Interpersonal conflict often results from the breach of an implicit contract. An implicit contract is an expectation that one person has of another. "When people violate implicit contracts, it causes confusion, annoyance, conflict..." (Lee, Pulvina & Perrone, 14). Comfortable family relationships are build on others behaving as we expect them to behave. With the addition of the student role, an adult may change a behavior that will, in turn, cause conflict within family relationships. "The source of conflict usually resides within people and their expectations of how others should behave" (Lee, Pulvina & Perrone, 14). Interpersonal conflict involves primary and secondary parties. Primary parties are those involved directly in the conflict, while secondary parties are others exposed to the conflict. In a conflict between spouses concerning who will be required to pickup the children from school, spouses are the primary parties, while the children, teachers and other family members would be secondary parties to the conflict. A conflict will touch both primary and secondary parties.

An adult student may experience conflict at home when he/she returns to school. The adult student may find that they are unable to perform all the duties that they did previously. If children expect Mom to be home when they arrive from school, or a wife expects her husband to prepare dinner, and she does the dishes, these unspoken expectations are considered implicit contracts. When an adult returns to school implicit contracts may change, causing conflict among family members. Family members should use conflict resolution strategies to work out new contracts in which all family members benefit. The adult student will also find that time becomes a scarce commodity, which must be parceled out to the assorted roles which he takes part.

Conflict at Work

There may be pressure on a worker to earn a credential to further a career or upgrade job skills. As above, conflict also occurs when an implicit contract is broken at work. The adult student may have always volunteered to work evening overtime, or was free to work flexible hours. He may no longer be available to work long, flexible hours and other employees may (unjustly) believe that the adult student is no longer carrying his share of the load. In addition, the adult student may be feeling pressure to excel in his educational endeavors, because everyone at work is aware of his academic attempts. Workers may consciously or unconsciously sabotage or interfere with a colleague returning to work. They may fear that the adult student will be able to use their newly acquired knowledge or skills to outdistance them by promotion or transfer. The co-worker may also resent the adult student for pursuing the goal of furthering his education. Conflict resolution strategies must also be employed in the workplace, and the adult student must act proactively to ensure that relationships are maintained, but results are achieved.

Strategies for Conflict Resolution

Whether conflict occurs at home or work, the adult student should approach the resolution with concern for maintaining relationships and satisfactorily resolving the conflict. The goal should be to create win-win situations so that all parties to the conflict win. A win-win situation occurs when both parties benefit from the resolution to the conflict, and neither party feels like there were compromises made in the final agreement. Consensus, not voting, is how a decision is reached in win-win situations.

A win-lose situation is where one party feels that he has lost something in the agreement and believes that another solution would have been a better choice. "Managing conflict is rarely about who is right or wrong. Rather, balance and harmony is about acknowledge, acceptance, and appreciation of differences" (Lee, Pulvino & Perrone, 61).

Borisoff and Victor (1989) have suggested that, "Conflict resolution seems to improve as we engage in certain types of behaviors." These behaviors are a method to work toward win-win situations and can be summarized as follows:

1. Focus on the problem, not on personalities.
2. Build on areas of agreement.
3. Attempt to achieve consensus.
4. Avoid provoking further conflict.
5. Don't overreact to the comments of others.
6. Consider compromise.

Effective use of these behaviors will allow for conflict resolution to take place in a calm, non-provoking environment. By avoiding aggravating further conflict or overreacting to the conflict at hand, the parties can come to an agreement quickly and redirect their effort to other matters. This strategy is different from the other conflict resolution strategies in that it offers compromise as a solution. Compromise is not recommended by the other strategies because it may not offer the win-win solution that is required for true conflict resolution.

According to Bolton (1979) both parties in the conflict resolution dealings must view the interaction positively. He states that there are three cornerstones to this end. The foundations for positive interaction are:

1. Treat the other person with respect.

2. Listen until you experience the other side and are able to reflect content, feelings and meanings accurately.
3. Are able to state briefly your own views, needs and feelings.

Bolton (1979) also offers a process for managing conflict. First, one must listen to the other person with respect and speak in noninflammatory tones. By listening with respect to the other party in a conflict, one listens to understand the point of view, not to refute what the other is saying. To speak in nonimflammatory tones, one does not accuse or speak loudly. One speaks calmly, not blaming or accusing the other, but clearly expressing views and feelings associated with the conflict. Second, one should offer a specific way of discussing the issue in question and ask the other person whether they would be wiling to try this way of relating. Finally, one can attempt to establish when an issue will be discussed.

Blake and Mouton (1970) suggest Facilitative Problem Solving in which problems are defined in terms of needs, not solutions; possible solutions are brainstormed, solutions which will meet both parties' needs are selected and the possible consequences are examined; a plan is made of who will do what, where and by whom; the plan is implemented and finally, the problem-solving process and solution are evaluated. Blake and Mouton developed an instrument, the Conflict Grid, to assist in implementation.

The Conflict Grid

1,9 Disagreements are smoothed over or ignored so that surface harmony is maintained.		9,9 Valid problem-solving takes place with varying points of view objectively evaluated against facts, emotions and reservations.
	5,5 Compromise, bargaining and middle ground positions are accepted, no one wins, and no one loses.	
1,1 Neutrality is maintained at all costs.		9,1 Conflict is suppressed through authority-obedience.

The 1,2 style of conflict resolution in Blake and Mouton's Conflict Grid is considered the hands-off approach, with the attitude of, 'the less said about the conflict, the better.' The 1,9 style of conflict resolution is one where conflicts exist but are never dealt with because relationships must be maintained at all costs. The 5,5 position on the grid represents willingness to compromise. Blake and Mouton assert that compromise should not be used to avoid deeper levels of conflict resolution. In the 9,1 style of conflict resolution, stalemates occurs, bringing the conflict resolution process to a screeching halt. The preferred style of conflict resolution is the 9,9 position of the conflict grid. This method is both person and results-oriented. "Differences are discussed with comments such as, 'I don't agree with the position that...'" (Tubbs, 282) Tubbs also states that with high concern for relationships and a high concern for conflict resolution, valid problem solving can take place when varying points of view are objectively evaluated against facts, emotions, reservations and doubts are examined and worked through (Tubbs, 282).

Walker & Harris (1995) offer the following guidelines to implement encouraging behavior:

1. Avoid feelings or perceptions which imply the other person is wrong or needs to change.
2. Communicate a desire to work together to explore a problem or seek a solution.
3. Exhibits behavior that is spontaneous and destruction free.
4. Identify with another's problems, share feelings, and accept others reactions.
5. Treat others with respect and trust.
6. Investigate issues rather than take sides.

These are all methods, which together encourage win-win conflict resolution. These guidelines will assist those in conflict to follow the 9,9 method of conflict resolution set forth in Blake and Mouton's Conflict Grid.

One can use Problem Solving methods suggested by Bolton (1979). "The steps in problem-solving include:

1. Define the problem in terms of needs, not solutions.
2. Brainstorm possible solutions.
3. Select the solution(s) that will best meet both parties needs & check possible consequences.
4. Plan who will do what, where and by when.
5. Implement the plan.
6. Evaluate the problem-solving process, and at a later date, how well the solution turned out" (240).

All primary parties to the conflict must identify the cause of the conflict and do so, not in terms of what the solutions are, but what the individual needs are. Once the needs are defined, the parties must brainstorm all possible solutions, not discounting any solutions at this point, but discussing all solutions as possible. Next, the parties should select a solution, not by voting, but by consensus. Both parties must believe that the solution is the best answer to the conflict. Explicit contracts should be made, where decisions are

made as to the details of the solution. The plan is then implemented and in an agreed upon time, is evaluated as to how the solution worked out.

Decker (1978) proposed the Time Zero method for conflict resolution, which focuses on the future, not on the past. Time Zero considers the time of conflict resolution is a time for renewal and moving forward rather than looking back. This method of conflict resolution is solution oriented. "When people encounter situations, they go through a typical pattern of errors. Specifically, when a conflict occurs, those involved have a high emotional response that leads them to one or more of the following reactions.

1. Fault statement of problem. Generalization and/or irrational thinking.
2. Impulsive explanation – responsibility for conflict is attributed to someone or something else
3. Impulsive solution – blame others and come up with an impulsive solution
4. Pleas for endorsement – When one experiences conflict, they want others to approve of and agree with their definition of the problem." (Decker,)

To resolve conflict expeditiously one must ensure that these errors do not occur in the resolution process.

Diane Yale (1988) suggests that the way we think about conflict has a tremendous effect on how we go about trying to resolve it. For example, if we think about conflict and conflict resolution as a battle to be won or lost, then we go into the situation ready to fight or surrender (depending upon our position). She suggests that those in conflict must create new paradigms. This theory can be connected to breaking of implicit contracts. The new paradigm is a change of the old implicit contracts to new contracts. These implicit contracts must be formed for the adult student to achieve conflict resolution. Conflict resolution strategies should be built on the assumption that restoration of harmony in relationships is the primary goal, not winning.

Time management should also be considered a resolution strategy to decrease conflict in the adult student experience. "... time is a fixed and limited, its' allocation to student (activities) has consequences in other life areas" (Kaplan & Saltiel, 18). "Studies must be organized around other commitments to the loss of the wider social aspects of the student's life. They often feel under pressure to maintain their overall performance in all their roles." (Blaxter & Tight, 1994) Some conflict can be lessened or avoided with effective time management skills. Time management must be practiced by the adult student to ensure that work, school and family all receive the time the student wishes to set aside for each. To practice time management, the adult student should prepare a quarterly schedule that includes work projects and deadlines, family events and school assignments and deadlines. Careful review will ascertain whether the student has over-scheduled himself and where future conflict may occur. The adult student must also learn to say no and learn when to ask for assistance. Some activities may have to be put aside while the adult student is pursuing his goal. Scheduling all personal activities will allow the student to plan long-term and short-term activities for home, work and school.

Implementing Conflict Resolution Strategies

The first step in conflict resolution must be to accurately identify the conflict. This is not necessarily the same as what an argument is about. The real conflict must be determined before conflict resolution methods can be used. To determine the actual cause of division, one could use the following four steps suggested by Lee, Pulvino, and Perrone (1998)

1. Identify the trigger event.
2. Decide what is next.
3. Help develop a plan.
4. Determine specific steps to take (116 – 118).

Those in conflict tend to lose their focus, so the subjects in conflict must be brought to the forefront. Once the cause of the conflict is stated, the primary parties to the conflict must decide what will happen next, but the focal point must remain on their personal actions, which will bring about the desired outcomes. Following these efforts, a plan is developed to attain the goal. Finally, the specific steps to obtain the goal are created. These steps should include the answers to who, what, where, when and how, so that the plan can be implemented and the steps of the plan are clear to all parties (Lee, Pulvino & Perrone, 1998).

Adult students must resolve conflict to maintain balance in their lives and restore harmony in their relationships. Attending school, while in the midst of discord caused by conflict will only make the difficult task of adding the role of student to an already busy life unbearable. The adult student must work to maintain balance in his life and in his roles. There must be a balance between home, school, work and leisure time. The adult student must prioritize and balance work, home and his education accordingly. Opportunity for conflict occurs when these roles become out of balance in the adult student's life.

By staying aware of his surroundings and events in his life, the adult student can act proactively when a conflict begins. To be proactive, one must be aware that a conflict has taken place, and then act to quickly resolve the conflict. Unresolved conflict cannot be ignored indefinitely. Although it is easier for the adult student to take a wait and see attitude with conflict, conflict must be resolved as soon as it is discovered.

Conflict does not usually resolve itself; rather it grows to magnitudes that cause pain and trouble. The adult student must approach the resolution with concern for maintaining relationships and satisfactorily resolving the conflict. The methods of conflict resolution presented in this paper could all be used in conjunction to effectively resolve conflict in the adult student's home or work relationships.

Implementation of any of the conflict resolution strategies will take effort on the part of the adult student. Any of the strategies presented can be used with others to be tailored to the experience of the adult student. The elements of communication, restoration of harmony, maintenance of relationships and successful conflict resolution are common to all of the strategies presented.

Conclusion

The adult student must maintain relationships and decrease conflict to consider resolution successful. This paper presented various methods of conflict resolution, which could be implemented so that the adult student can concentrate on learning objectives and ultimately his goal of increasing his knowledge, skills and abilities.

Borisoff and Victor's Conflict Resolution Behaviors suggest methods to strengthen communication to ease the way for conflict resolution. These methods lead to win-win solutions. Bolton's Three Cornerstones offer suggestions on the attitudes that the adult student must employ to understand the true conflict. Blake and Mouton's Facilitative Problem Solving, implemented using the Conflict Grid, ensures the steps to conflict resolution lead to valid problem solving. Walker and Harris' Encouraging Behaviors support win-win solutions to conflict by stressing open communication and

non-destructive behaviors. Time Zero conflict resolution strategy takes the past out of the conflict and works to resolve conflict from the present moment forward. Diane Yale suggests that the proper attitude toward conflict contributes to one's ability to successfully resolve conflict. Finally, this paper presented a Time Management strategy as an attempt to resolve time conflicts in the adult student's schedule.

An adult student returns to school for a plethora of reasons. In order to be successful in his educational pursuits he must realize that his life will change in unexpected ways. He must be ready to work, not only on his academic quest, but also on personal and work relationships and on timely resolution of conflict. Successful conflict resolution takes an investment of time and energy to achieve win-win solutions.

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